

“We Paint On A Frame ... Certainly Not On The Floor!”

Scenic art in the theatre has a tradition which stretches back to times which pre-date Shakespeare. The development of the genre, and its close relationship with more traditional kinds of art have been little studied, and usually as an aside to more ‘important’ subjects.

The ability to translate small scale imagery onto an enormous canvas is a highly skilful process which demands a certain very particular ability which many find hard to comprehend.

Various theatrical terms have and continue to be used to describe the area given over in a theatre to carry out the activity of scene painting. These include: painting room (the phrase used at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), scenic workshop, paint shop, paint frame and scenery painting room. The scenic canvas was mounted upon a vertical timber paint frame which could be moved up and down as required by the scenic artist. A timber mezzanine floor allowed the artist to work without the use of a ladder, whilst the frame passed through a large slot in the floor.

The Painting Room was an essential part of a creative theatre environment during the nineteenth century. In house facilities of this kind were important elements of a major producing theatre such as the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Interestingly, painting rooms attached to theatres seem to have been far more common than independent commercial painting rooms prior to the establishment of the Scenic Artists Association in 1903.

The Painting Room as a building type can be divided into three distinct building categories:

- A separate building mass attached to theatres; as in the case of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane
- A building attached to the rear of theatre stages
- A separate building used as commercial scenic painting premises

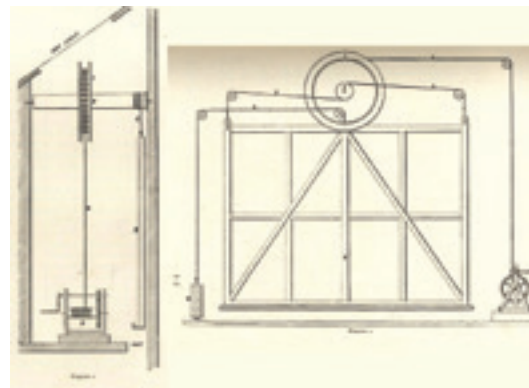
The theatre tradition of painting on a frame is peculiar to the British Isles. On the Continent scenery is painted upon the floor. This distinction is perhaps a direct result of the historic variance in theatre funding. Throughout the nineteenth century theatre in the British Isles was funded almost exclusively by private enterprise, whereas on the Continent it was largely seen as the responsibility of the state. Under such circumstances as this square footage in a theatre was at a premium and the vertical efficiency offered by a paint frame must have been attractive to theatre managers

and professional jobbing scene-painters alike.

The design of a theatre’s Painting Room changed little between the eighteenth century painting room at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket and the Painting Room at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane which was rebuilt in 1900 (see illustrations). The frames were raised and lowered using the traditional stage carpenters mechanism known as the “drum and shaft”. In 1875 Frederick Lloyds wrote his definitive British treatise, *Practical Guide to Scene Painting and Painting in Distemper*¹.

Lloyds describes the arrangements of the Painting Room in some detail:

“In order that the scene painter may be able to reach every portion of his scene at will, the painting frames are hung upon lines and slide up and down the “cut” or opening in the floor of the room, the lowering and raising being effected by means of a windlass. (See diagrams Nos. 1 and 2) 1, purchase wheel; 2, shaft; 3, counterweight line; 4, counterweight, to balance the weight of the frame; 5, lines for raising and lowering frame, winding on and off shaft; 6, purchase line, led over small wheel to windlass, 7; 8, painting frame.”²



One of the earliest known images of a British scene-painter’s studio is depicted in a c.1785 watercolour by Michaelangelo Rooker. Rooker’s father was a well-known harlequin at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane as well as a landscape painter and topographer. Michaelangelo studied with Paul Sandby and contributed some of the plates to George Colman the Elder’s edition of *The Dramatick Works of Beaumont and Fletcher of 1778*. The following year Fletcher engaged him as a scene painter at the ‘Little Theatre in the Haymarket’ and he remained there until 1797.

James Boaden wrote of him in his *Life of J.P.Kemble*:

¹ Lloyds, Fredrick, *Practical Guide to Scene Painting and Distemper*, pub: George Rowney & Co., London, 1875.

² *Op.cit.*, p.2.

by David Wilmore
of **theatresearch**

“In small figure, for book embellishment, he equalled De Louthembourg; and some of his scenery for Old Colman was quite upon a par with what that great artist had left in Garrick’s theatre. When a child, I remember looking over him in front of the house, while with a rapid pencil he freely but adequately sketched the procession of the Jubilee, as the characters passed.”³

Rooker’s watercolour shows a scene-painter working in the painting room or scene loft at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, London. The scenery is attached to a paint frame similar in design to the present four paint frames at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Cloths and flats could be raised or lowered by a winch while the scenic artist could either stand on the floor or take the paints onto a bridge (as shown in the engraving of the WR Beverley painting room at TRDL) which itself could be raised. At the right of the picture above the scenic artist can be seen a travelling bridge hauled right up while on the left hand side the bridge for a second paint frame is in the lower position.



Theatre Royal, Haymarket – Scene Painter’s Loft by Michaelangelo Rooker courtesy of The British Museum

The Rooker image of c.1785 significantly predates all other surviving imagery. Almost one hundred years later an engraving of the same painting room appeared on the front page of *The Graphic*⁴ illustrated paper.

³ Boaden, James, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble Esq.*, pub: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, London, 1825.

⁴ *A Scene Painter’s Studio – Preparing For Christmas – Sketched at the Haymarket Theatre*, *The Graphic*, Saturday

Comparison clearly demonstrates that little had changed, save that the painting bridge had been repositioned slightly forward. In reality there was little need for change because the technology served its purpose. The theatre manager J.B. Buckstone is pictured with the scene-painter discussing the production. Despite *The Graphic* newspaper caption, “Preparing for Christmas” is slightly misleading because the Haymarket did not present a pantomime in 1873! It is however possible that the scenery under discussion on the paint-frame was being prepared for W.S. Gilbert’s new play *Charity*, which opened on the 3rd January 1874.



A Scene Painter’s Studio – Preparing for Christmas – Sketched at the Haymarket Theatre, [*The Graphic*, Saturday December 27th 1873, p.597.]

Painting Rooms built as a separate building attached to a theatre

- The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 1900, Grade I
- Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, 1894, Category B
- Royal Theatre, Northampton, 1887, Grade II

Surviving examples include:

The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 1900, Grade I

The internal arrangements of the Painting Room have changed little since the

December 27th 1873, p.597.

reconstruction of the late 1890s. It comprises four original timber paint frames, one against each long wall and two back to back in the centre of the room



: The Drury Lane Painting Room Looking Towards Drury Lane [photo: theatresearch]

It is fitted out with a timber mezzanine floor which forms the main working level for scenic artists. The whole space is lit from above by natural daylight and would have originally been lit by carbon filament electric lighting in order to allow the scenic artists to work under the same colour temperature conditions as those used to light the scenery onstage.

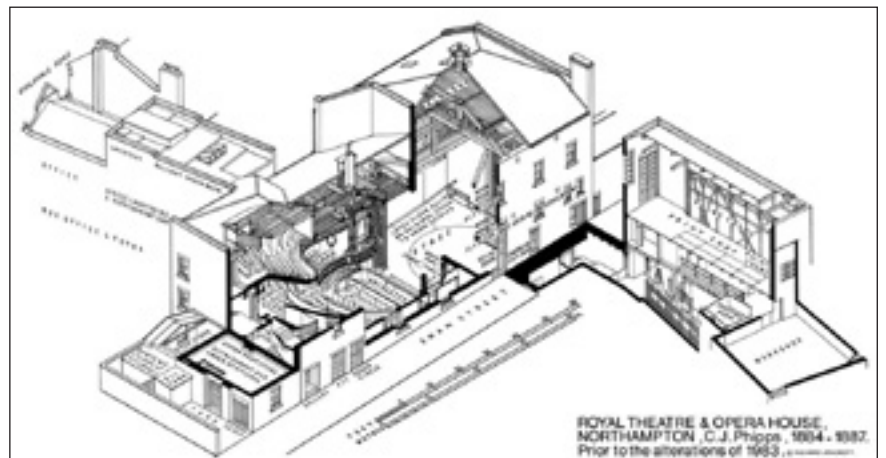
Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, 1894, Category B (currently being restored).

Painting Room, Citizens Theatre, Glasgow
[photo: theatresearch]



Royal Theatre, Northampton, 1887, Grade II

This theatre and associated painting room was originally built in 1884 (and rebuilt in 1887 after a fire) by the well known theatre architect C.J. Phipps. The painting room and associated scenery store were built on the other side of a narrow lane and linked to the stage (which is below street level) by an underground passage.



Drawing courtesy of Robert Leacroft

The painting room houses two original paint frames originally operated by a set of drum and shaft mechanisms located in the upper regions of the roof. The frames are still in regular use by the repertory company which still creates its own work in the theatre.

Painting Room attached to the rear of a theatre stage

Surviving examples include:

- Grand Theatre & Opera House, Leeds, 1878, Grade II*
- King's Theatre, Edinburgh, 1906, Category A
- Gaiety Theatre & Opera House, Douglas, Isle of Man, 1900, Manx List

The Gaiety Theatre & Opera House was designed by the famous theatre architect Frank Matcham. It opened in 1900 and was from the outset a touring venue which from time to time painted scenery for in house productions and other theatres on the island. The painting room has been restored and is located at the rear of the stage house which includes an elevated painting room floor provided with natural daylight.



*Gaiety Theatre & Opera House, Douglas, Isle of Man Paint Frame & Floor Looking Upstage
photo: Mervin Stokes*

Painting Rooms built as separate commercial premises

Surviving examples include:

- Thomas Grieve & Son Scenic Painting Room, Macklin Street, London, 1851-52, Grade II, (internally gutted)



*Thomas Walford Grieve
portrait (1841-1899)
theatresearch archive*



*Thomas Grieve & Son Scenic Painting Room
23 Macklin Street c.1986 photo: theatresearch
archive*

- Elms Lester Painting Rooms, Flitcroft Street, London, 1903-04, Grade II (still fully intact but not used as a paint studio)



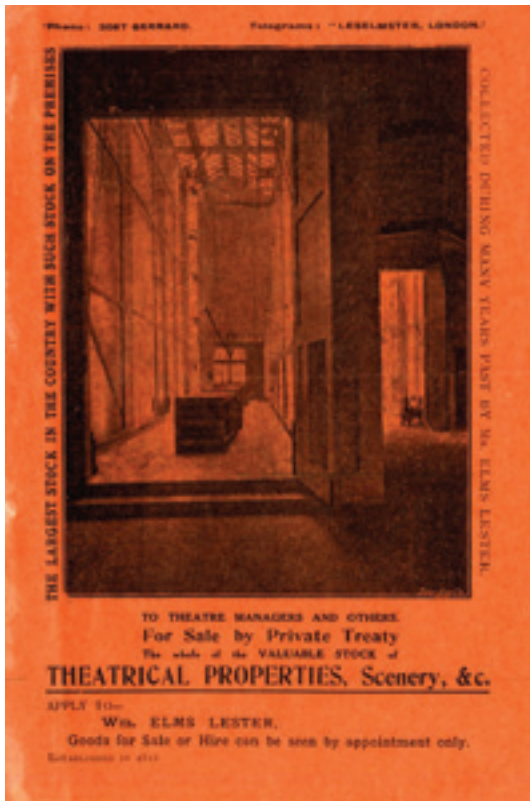
*Elms Lester Painting Rooms & Stores Photo:
theatresearch archive*



Elms Lester Painting Rooms & Stores
 Photo: theatresearch archive
Elms Lester Auction Catalogue c. 1905
 [theatresearch archive]



Joseph Harker in His Studio Painting Scenery
 for the Royal Opera House Covent Garden's
 production of Parsifal [Illustrated London News,
 31st January 1914, p.173 – theatresearch archives]



- Harker's Studio, Queen's Row, London, 1904, Grade II (recently converted to domestic accommodation)⁵

The campaign to save Harker's studio gained much momentum a few years ago but it is understood that redevelopment has now taken place.

- Ryan's Painting Room, Penrose Street, London, c1912, Not Listed (internally altered)



Ryan's Paint Studios, 36-38 Penrose Street, London

The traditional paint shops of the nineteenth century are now few and far between. Whilst building shells survive, the industrial archaeology of "scenic paint factory" are now extremely scarce. As with all forms of theatre, techniques, styles and presentation evolves – distemper has been replaced by acrylics, and acrylics have been replaced to a certain extent by printing! What would the scenic greats have had to say ... we can only begin to imagine ... and we certainly couldn't have printed it!

⁵ [see: *Studio & Stage – Joseph Harker's autobiography, pub: Nisbet & Co., 1924*]